Teaching Community: Lessons Learned in Wartime

by Darlene Haffner Hoffman and Ray C. Spencer

The continuing war on terror highlights the need for educators to emphasize community building and peaceful problem solving.

The ongoing war against terrorism presents some unique challenges to the nation's educators. Classroom teachers must cope with explaining daily war news and acts of violence to their students. Decisions must be made about whether to continue with "business as usual" in the classroom or to devote class time to discussing current events. It is important for teachers to recognize that their students' behaviors and attitudes are influenced by changes in the political climate of the nation and world.

When war broke out in Iraq, many teachers realized more time was needed for discussions of current events (Schouten 2003). As television news coverage brought the conflict into the nation's living rooms, teachers and students alike became aware of the problems arising from a lack of a sense of world community. Some students experienced heightened feelings of loss, anger, and separation. Sensitive teachers recognized that children in their classes would have varied reactions to the war, especially because some are likely to be children or siblings of military personnel, while others may have Iraqi relatives or friends. Wise teachers involved their students in reaching out to members of the armed forces in positive ways. Collecting items to send to the troops or writing letters to service members overseas helped students feel a sense of active participation, thus reducing feelings of anxiety and helplessness.

Educators may wish to take time to reflect on the lessons learned by students and teachers from the recent experiences of war. Few students were unaffected by the scenes of destruction and suffering that followed September 11, 2001. Similarly, the more recent experience of see-

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ing news stories directly from the front lines cannot fail to influence children's awareness of the effects of the conflict. We know that children confronted with violence may act out their anxiety and fear through increased activity, lack of participation, aggression, or changes in mood (Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo, and Hendrix 1995). While teachers and parents often are aware of children's immediate stress, the long-term emotional effects of the trauma may not be known for some time.

Following earlier wars, significant changes in the educational climate occurred. For example, the Vietnam era spawned a movement away from academic regimentation and toward more humanistic schools (Rogers 1969; Silberman 1970).

Immediately following the September 11 attacks, the country experienced a groundswell of patriotism. Students in schools across the nation eagerly participated in cooperative efforts to assist victims of the attack. Citizens felt a new sense of unity. The new war resulted in patriotic flag waving, while the nation rallied around the victims, uniting in efforts to help. Entire communities worked together to support disaster relief. For the first time, many children and adolescents experienced what it meant to work with one another for a cause beyond their immediate needs. In schools and in their communities, they found excitement in working together.

Perhaps the renewed sense of community that was evidenced in working together can provide a sense of direction for teachers. Societal events inevitably influence what occurs in the nation's classrooms. Educators must recognize that, though September 11 has passed and the war on terror remains unresolved, the proverbial "teachable moment" may have arrived.

Many educators recognize the importance of modeling effective problem solving in schools (Spencer and Hoffman 2001). They want to be proactive and strive for positive educational change in classroom climate. Teachers recognize that students' academic progress is more likely to improve in classrooms and in a world in which students feel safe emotionally and socially. Yet, with the current national and state emphasis on students' passing standardized tests, teachers feel reluctant to stray from the traditional curriculum.

In reality, teachers can use a number of strategies to create classrooms that emphasize community, while concurrently teaching traditional content and skills. Research foundations for community building and violence prevention have already been established (Goleman 1997; Committee for Children 1997). Teachers can learn to integrate community-building concepts into the various content areas they teach. Teachers can structure their discipline strategies to emphasize community and to reduce the adversarial interaction between teachers and students. Schools that emphasize nurturance, inclusiveness, and community feeling are less likely to have incidences of violence (Walker 1995).

Immediately after September 11, children needed adults in their lives to listen and reassure. Over the longer term, teachers have helped students to identify ways that young people could actively contribute to relief efforts. By assisting students to become involved personally in constructive actions, teachers have taught lessons about the importance of the welfare of the broader community.

The Challenge for Schools

The ultimate challenge confronting educators is to create schools in which students regularly experience learning communities that encourage problem solving without aggression. In learning communities, concern for the well-being of the whole class or school assumes primary importance in decision-making, and students are assisted to learn to be responsible members of a caring community (Lickona 1991). At the same time, students must be able to develop a sense of belongingness, which Glasser (1969; 1998) deemed essential for students to succeed in school. Dill (1998) described a "peaceable school" in which students and teachers practice a culture of nonviolence based on humane concern for others while emphasizing self-respect and respect for others.

Goleman (1997) suggested that fundamental ethical stances in life stem from an underlying emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence involves the ability to live in a community—to adapt in social situations, understand others' feelings, and delay gratification in relation to long-term goals. Goleman's research suggested that academic success is related to the level of emotional intelligence and that career success may be more related to emotional intelligence than to cognitive intelligence.

The concept of community implies inclusiveness, reinforcing the need to provide special assis-

tance for all students at risk behaviorally or academically before the problems become insurmountable (Gable and Van Acker 2000; Guetzloe 2000). Ross Greene's (1998) book, *The Explosive Child,* alerted teachers to the need for schools to plan ahead to help severely disruptive children. Greene stated that most children will do well if they can. Sometimes, faculty members simply must plan ahead to provide individual services for students who are not being successful.

Schools can facilitate emotional and social-skill development by using school-wide violence-prevention programs. Packaged programs, such as *Character Counts* (Ali, Brengle, Donoho, and Streitmatter 2001) and *Second Step* (Committee for Children 1997), are among those that have demonstrated through research the potential to decrease disciplinary referrals and increase pro-social behaviors. Both programs provide excellent lessons, games, and simulations for teachers to use with students. *Second Step* incorporates a number of elements: empathy, impulse control, anger management, and problem-solving skills. The program provides practical, grade-level-specific lessons for elementary and middle school students. When faculty members implement packaged or locally designed programs for building community, there is a greater possibility for change throughout students' educational experiences.

In addition, teachers can find numerous Web sites that provide K–12 lesson plans for teaching students about living in a community. For example:

- lessons in conflict resolution *(www.teach-nology.com/teachers/lesson_plans/health/conflict*);
- tolerance and multicultural understanding (*www.tolerance.org/teachindex.jsp*);
- decision making (*www.teach-nology.com/teachers/lesson_plans/health/decisions*);
- empathy and interpersonal understanding (*www.lessonplanspage.com/SSOTerrorism-UnderstandingEmpathy57.htm*);
- social responsibility (*www.esrnational.org/wtclessons.htm*); and
- character building (*www.goodcharacter.com*).

The Challenge for Individual Teachers

Often individual teachers, working by themselves, become committed to developing a greater sense of community within their classrooms. Through trial and error, they find what works for them. Yet, with little time to devote to separate lessons, can educators teach students to value cooperation and peaceful problem solving? The answer to this question depends on the flexibility and creative imagination of the teachers involved. Each teacher must approach the subject from his or her own discipline and style. Developing classrooms that build community is a matter of "mindset." Once a teacher commits to the goal of community, he or she can find many ways to create classrooms that emphasize community. The following suggestions may provide a starting point for teachers and schools.

Teachers should begin with a shared vision of what "community" means. A classroom community means that students and teachers collaborate to make the classroom a positive place for *all* students to learn. Cooperation is emphasized over competition, and teachers recognize students who strive to do their best rather than being best and students who help everyone to learn rather than feel superior to those who do not learn as quickly. Students should put forth united efforts toward goals, supporting one another and taking pride in one another's differences. They should recognize that responsible decision-making considers whole-group welfare as well as individual welfare. Students must understand that peaceful, nonviolent, and non-power-oriented solutions to problems exist and can be found through persistent effort.

Teachers can incorporate talk about community from the first through the last day of school, modeling community in their own interactions with students, teaching about community through their course content, and providing time in the teaching day to address problems informally within the classroom community. For example, teachers at any grade level might spend time on the first day of school introducing grade-level appropriate examples of what it is to be a member of the community. Also appropriate would be to develop a vocabulary of community, suggesting that words like *punishment, revenge,* and *get even* are better replaced with words like *understanding, caring, respect,* and *responsibility* (Lickona 1991). Teachers can hold regular class meetings and have a suggestion box through which students can discuss problems and how to solve them. Students can be invited to help create bulletin boards by bringing news clippings or cartoons that illustrate community values. Class mottos and mascots can be developed to increase group identity.

Teachers can examine their disciplinary policies to determine whether they teach understanding of

the behavior of the community. Effective discipline planning includes the use of clear expectations for behaviors presented in the context of creating a positive learning climate. Emphasis should be placed on the intrinsic rewards for good behavior, with a focus on the satisfaction of work done well, rather than using external rewards to coerce effort. Logical consequences that relate to disruptive behavior should be identified, and cooperation emphasized rather than compliance (Kohn 1996). Conflict-resolution strategies can be used (Girard and Koch 1996). The focus should be on understanding the effects of misbehavior on others, emphasizing the need to look at the outcomes of the choices that students make and evaluate them in relation to the questions "Does your behavior help you learn? Does it help the group learn? What other behaviors could you choose?" (Glasser 1998). Peer involvement in identifying classroom policies and recommending solutions for class-wide behavior problems is also suggested.

Teachers need to recognize that every subject can be related to community. Community-building concepts, such as empathy, conflict resolution, and respect for self and others, can be incorporated into daily lessons.

• Teachers of English and language arts can use almost any story, play, or book as a basis for facilitating empathy. For example, having students retell a story from the viewpoint of another character in the story provides the experience of understanding how feelings may differ. Involving students in discussing motives and effects of actions in any kind of literature provides an excellent way for them to explore their own thoughts and feelings.

• Social sciences are another obvious vehicle for building community. Simulations of historical events can enable students to examine situations from differing perspectives and understand the need for responsible decision-making.

• Art lessons can assist students to explore emotional content, particularly anger, in visual ways, providing opportunities for students to view creative outlets for confronting their own emotions.

• Mathematics teachers can assist students to develop logical steps to problem solving. In lower elementary grades, simply approaching topics like division from the concept of how to "share" ten pieces of candy equally among five people incorporates a sense of group welfare.

• Science teachers can assist students to recognize the ethical components of many scientific issues, as well as reinforce the logical steps of problem solving.

• Physical education can emphasize the importance of teamwork. Teachers can downplay the importance of winning in individual team sports, encouraging students to compete with their own records and take pride in improvement and effort.

In every content area, teachers can involve students in some form of service activity. When students work together for a good cause, there is a spontaneous development of community spirit. For example, members of a choir who prepare a special holiday concert for senior citizens can learn to give back to their community. In every discipline, students can learn to respect themselves and others, value group achievement, and consider the impact of self-serving behavior as compared to collaborative effort.

Lessons Learned

Among the lessons learned from the September 11 attack and the ongoing war on terror is that, as a nation, we can work together to respond to crises. Teachers must assist students to live, work, and solve problems collaboratively with their classroom communities. Through community building comes the potential for reducing discipline problems, decreasing violent behavior, and assisting students to become adults who seek greater community in their own lives and help build a sense of community in the world.

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